



MOVING story

MiniMovers is one of Australia's most successful removalists and at the helm is a driven man with an unusual vision as **Nicola Card** reports



Mike O'Hagan created a successful removal business from scratch and is now sharing his winning formula with others

IF YOU WANT TO develop a new business, forget what you know, focus on a need. Don't rely on a business plan for incoming work: follow demand. Enter an under serviced market, and one with a large customer base. These are just some of the many mantras of MiniMovers mogul Mike O'Hagan, who each week addresses business groups about drivers of success.

Described as 'one of Queensland's most innovative businessmen' O'Hagan maintains "Word of mouth advertising is

by far the best way to grow any small business." He lives by his creed: 77 per cent of MiniMovers' work stems from happy customers and referrals and the company's growth rate is moving along at a health 45 per cent annually.

For a man who failed to shine at school or in the workforce early on, business growth and the characteristics of entrepreneurs are matters close to O'Hagan's heart. Twenty two years ago with just \$200 in the bank and one trustee ute he established MiniMovers. Today

there are 100 vehicles in the fleet and 300 employees at depots in two states. Each week his teams in Southeast Queensland and Melbourne help 1200 people move house or office. MiniMovers has an annual turnover of \$23 million.

"Success in any business is about the mindset of the person," O'Hagan tells business gatherings at Business Swap, NEIS (New Enterprise Incentive Scheme), Chambers of Commerce and networking groups. "If people are positive and remain that way, they will do well." ▶



Although O'Hagan concedes his activities through business groups help spread the brand name, his passion stems from wanting to help people grow their business. He's devoted countless hours mentoring hundreds of people, often highlighting the need to experiment rather than follow a strict business plan.

"Most people start a business based on what they know and assume success follows marketing and fixed projections. But that is the wrong way. Instead they should first find a need, develop a service and systemise it so people can do it their way. They need to conceive ideas, continually test them, measure and track responses such as marketing drives to determine what's working and develop it while dump what isn't working.

"The opportunity net is big. To a large extent, people can control what opportunities come into their lives... it's mostly a case of recognising them when they come along. The majority of opportunities are right in front of their eyes."

It certainly was in the case of MiniMovers which O'Hagan established as a small scale pick-up and drop-off service before realising there was a bigger picture, namely the demand for house and office removals.

It was also a turning point in the life of the man who left school and the security of the family farm in New Zealand to go backpacking around Australia and over eight years led the life of itinerant worker in 35 jobs as diverse as forklift driver, prawn fisherman, club manager and tomato picker... while gathering ideas and honing gut feelings about business dynamics.

These days O'Hagan makes no bones about his disdain for the education system, which he says, tends to foster lack of self-esteem in the less academic.

"Schools tend to create a negative atmosphere and unless you're at the top you can suffer but there are people with intelligence who don't find success at school.

"There are two types of people – managers and entrepreneurs. Managers understand and accept instructions and

are concerned with risk whereas entrepreneurs fall through the cracks of the education system, they question instructions and are often at the bottom of the system, it's a challenge.

"Did you know about 95 per cent of people with MBAs end up as managers – employees – rather than entrepreneurs?"

O'Hagan tends to stir strong feelings in his audiences. Following one address an attendee declared he'd rip up his MBA, which O'Hagan attributes to his

O'HAGAN'S ELEVEN

Among his pearls of wisdom harvested over 22 years:

- The difference between success and failure is often simply mindset, you go where you aim – it's your choice
- The critical factors for building business success are persistence, drive, determination, and out-and-out tenacity
- Smart people are constantly conceiving and testing several different things
- Maximise the number of opportunities coming your way by spreading yourself around, being noticed and recognising opportunities
- Many very large and most small businesses were started with no money (so what really is at risk, then?) and many successful entities have no formal business plan
- Break big jobs down to smaller tasks which are more manageable... one step at a time
- Develop a memorable business name
- Develop a feel good website 'brochure' – one page spelling out all company services and contacts
- Avoid .net or .org at the end of your website, stick to .com
- Find a current or retired successful business person and ask them to mentor you, meet every fortnight in a relaxed setting and use them as a sounding board for your ideas, and
- Don't take advice from people with an ulterior motive.

revelations about growing a business from experimenting – conceiving, testing, measuring and duplicating – rather than formal planning, which is commonly advocated.

Being a source of inspiration for budding entrepreneurs, O'Hagan recommends a series of small steps to make progress on the path to success. "Small business people fear bigger things. The best way of coping with this is to break things down into chunks. Nothing is impossible, it just takes longer. It's like a game of chess."

Three years ago MiniMovers expanded into Melbourne where there are now 106 staff or a third of the workforce. With five depots, growth is exceeding all expectations, and staff recruitment is a priority. This too has become another part of the success story as MiniMovers only takes on people who 'want a job'.

And it's another aspect on which O'Hagan expresses strong views. "When you are growing a business, hiring experienced people is nothing but trouble. It's better to employ people without skills and train them up. And the best trainers are those who are doing the job.

"We have a mateship culture, a good crew to start with and we let our employees, our staff, pick new people. It's a self-regulating system. They know within the first few days if things will work out, and reject about 20 for every one person hired permanently." The entire employment system is website driven: each week MiniMovers receives around 200 applications online.

Successful applicants soon get to enjoy the work's perks. First thing each morning they can tuck into a hot cooked breakfast. From then on – in between some hard manual work shifting boxes and furniture – they receive career path development advice and benefits including paid training. There are flexible working weeks, too.

"Modern managers must realise that working nine to five is no longer the norm and is not necessarily what is wanted. Work life balance is important, some want longer working hours, others less, some want bursts of work," O'Hagan contends. ▶

Such innovative policies have earned MiniMovers the title Employer of Choice, and for its attention to systemised and streamlined training the company has picked up numerous awards, including the Australian National Training Association (ANTA) Award for Excellence in Training and the Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Apprenticeship Services Training Awards for Medium Employer of the Year.

O'Hagan – who lists Dick Smith, “a doer and a true entrepreneur” as one of his heroes – sums up his own strengths as having a basic commonsense approach and “out of the box” thinking. “I having a passion for business, it’s what feeds my family,” O'Hagan said. “Most business owners have a passion for their trade. I have no passion for ‘moving furniture’ instead my passion is for ‘owning a business’. This attitude lets me work on, instead of in, my business, and when combined with my personal goal to

generate a good income plus the freedom of how I choose to spend my time, then that makes me an entrepreneur. Owners with a passion for their trade often own a job.”

Spending just four hours a week in his own business and the rest of the time doing whatever he wants. He’s living proof, mixing pleasure with business, travel is frequent. O'Hagan recently visited Japan and Shanghai and says it’s only during long-haul flights that he finds time to catch up on the latest business magazines, because committee work takes another slab of his time/life.

He’s a Commissioner for the Australian Fair Pay Commission, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, a Director of the Heart Research Institute Association (Qld), and a member of the Small Business Advisory Panel to the Reserve Bank of Australia.

O'Hagan has picked up oodles of business awards along the way: Telstra and Queensland Government Small Business of the year (2003), Ernst & Young Australia Northern region Finalist Entrepreneur of the Year (2004) and Queensland Government Office of Fair Trading – Inaugural TradeSmart Consumer Award (2005). He’s also one of 14 finalists in the 2007 Entrepreneur of The Year Awards.

Asked what his own employees might have to say about him in the pub over a beer, he laughs “I hope they’d say I’m a fair and honest boss!” Without prompting, one staff member volunteered “he really is a great guy to work for – there is no doubt this man does walk the talk.” ●

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